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Stories from South Central, WV

Amplifying the voices of the prisoners in South Central Regional Jail in Charleston, WV

Press Release: West Virginia Prison Phone Call Rates Drop by 87%

🕒 June 12, 2015 📁 Project updates 👤 storiesfromsouthcentralwv

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West Virginia Prison Phone Call Rates Drop by 87%

Prisoner Advocates Call for WV Regional Jails to Follow Suit

Charleston, West Virginia — Phone calls from West Virginia state prisons are dramatically cheaper starting this week, now costing just 48 cents for a 15-minute call, compared to the previous rate of \$3.75 for the same call. According to the new phone service provider, this is the **lowest rate** for any state in the country — and it has just taken effect for all state-owned and -operated prisons.

“It would’ve been a hell of a lot better to have these cheap calls when I was inside,” said Eric D. Ayers, a formerly incarcerated volunteer with the prisoner support and organizing group Stories From South Central. “\$3 a call is ridiculous, and they charged \$5 just to put \$20 on your account. You get depressed and have nobody to lean on, nobody to talk to. You miss your family and if you’ve got kids it makes it even harder.”

After a nearly two-year bidding process, the West Virginia Department of Corrections has a new contract with ICSolutions, also called CenturyLink, which has several key improvements for incarcerated people and their loved ones. Calls to anywhere in the country now have the same low rate: 3.2 cents per minute. All fees have been eliminated, except for taxes. The kickback paid to the DOC has been nearly eliminated: It was 46% but is now 0.1% of revenue, with the total amount paid estimated to drop by 99.96%.

“Isolation is one of the ways that prisons break people down,” said Jonathan Sidney, a volunteer with Stories From South Central. “Making it cheaper for people doing time in West Virginia to stay in touch

with friends and family improves their quality of life and makes re-entry to the ‘outside world’ easier.” Studies have shown that greater contact with the outside also reduces recidivism, which means fewer people go back to prison. Even a small reduction in the prison population can save the state significant amounts of money.

These new rates seriously reduce the unfair burden placed on people accepting calls from people in prisons. The end of the kickback means the end of a back-door tax on communities with the highest rates of incarceration: low-income and communities of color. The most recent available data show that in 2012, these kickbacks represented a transfer of over \$931,000 from prisoners’ families directly to the DOC’s budget. Phone fees should be not a way to shift the burden of funding prisons onto the families of incarcerated people — and now, in West Virginia, this hidden tax is coming to an end.

The elimination of fees is also a major change, and sets West Virginia apart from most states. Advocates have found that 38% of all the money spent by prisoners’ families on phone calls goes to fees. Now, West Virginians will no longer be paying exorbitant phone fees to privately owned phone companies.

Regional jails and the two privately-owned prisons in West Virginia (Stevens Correctional Center and McDowell County Correctional Center) are not affected by this change, and will continue to use the previous rate structure with Global Tel Link, at least for the time being. (An unidentified staff person at Stevens Correctional Center said that she was told their phone system would change in two to three months.) Federal prisons in the state will continue to charge 6 cents/minute for local calls and 21 cents/min for long distance calls.

Stories From South Central is calling on the WV Regional Jail Authority (RJA) to follow suit and adopt this new rate structure for the thousands of people held in our state’s 10 regional jails. Advocates also urge the Dept. of Corrections and RJA to reform their privately run health care and commissary deposit systems, both of which rely on substantial and unfair fees paid by prisoners or their families and friends.

“We appreciate that the DOC has taken steps to make prisoners’ lives better, to limit the cost burden on their family members, and to reduce the size of our state’s prison population,” said Chris Gang, a volunteer with Stories from South Central. “But we’re concerned that the state might try to recoup this lost revenue by privatizing other prison services, or adding fees onto existing or new services, like replacing in-person visits with expensive video-only visitation, as some other jails and prisons across the country have done.”

“We urge the DOC to reduce the state’s imprisoned population to balance its budget, rather than relying on raising funds by taxes and fees placed on people in prisons and jails or their friends and family members,” Gang added. “No one should have to go into debt to support their loved ones in prison — imprisonment itself is enough of a punishment.”

To accept calls using this new system, after an introductory free one-minute call, friends and family members will need to set up an account by going to <http://www.icsolutions.com> or by calling 888-506-8407. Prepaid funds can be withdrawn from the previous provider, GTL, by calling 866-230-7761.

For more information, contact Stories from South Central at storiesfromsouthcentralwv@gmail.com or 681-214-0884.

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Stories from South Central is a volunteer-run, West Virginia-based prisoner support, advocacy, and organizing project founded after the January 2014 chemical spill. Its website documents prisoners' letters and stories of mistreatment at Charleston's South Central Regional Jail:

<http://storiesfromsouthcentralwv.com>

Sources:

- CenturyLink cost proposal submitted to WV Purchasing Department <<http://bit.ly/ICS-cost-proposal>>
- Prison Policy Initiative report, "Please Deposit All of Your Money" <<http://bit.ly/pls-deposit>>
- Prison Phone Justice report on West Virginia rates and kickbacks <<http://bit.ly/ppj-wv>>